

## Plot and Conflict

Every good story is fueled by conflict. Can the hero survive the dangerous journey? Will the star-crossed lovers end up together, despite their feuding families? When a story grabs your interest, it's usually because the conflict is exciting and dramatic. Looking closely at how conflicts develop throughout the stages of a plot is a key part of analyzing a story and understanding *why* it hooks you.

### COMMON CORE

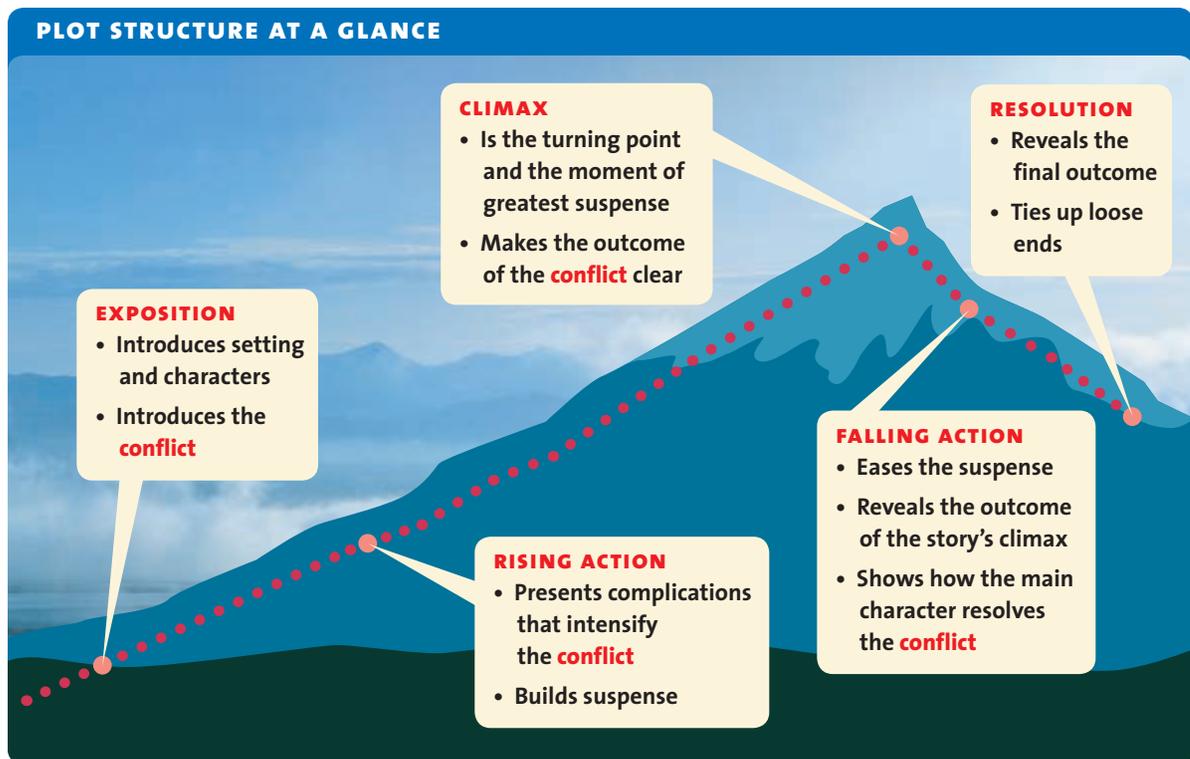
Included in this workshop:  
**RL 5** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

### Part 1: Plot Stages and Conflict

The series of events in a narrative is called **plot**. At the heart of any plot is a **conflict**, or struggle, between opposing forces. A conflict is internal or external.

- An **internal conflict** is a struggle within a character's mind. The struggle usually centers on a choice or decision the character must make. Should she tell the truth? Can he overcome his jealousy?
- An **external conflict** is a clash between a character and an outside force, such as another character, society, or a force of nature. Will the athlete defeat her bitter rival? Can the soldiers endure the war?

Whether internal or external, a conflict is usually introduced at the beginning of a narrative. As the characters attempt to resolve the conflict, "the plot thickens" at each stage. Will the characters succeed? You keep turning the pages to find out the answer to this question.





### MODEL 1: CONFLICT IN EXPOSITION

In the exposition of this story, a young warrior named Temas is about to face a crucial test of adulthood in Masai culture—killing a lion. What conflicts emerge as Temas prepares for this pivotal moment?

from  
**BROTHERS ARE THE SAME**

Short story by **Beryl Markham**

Yet in his mind Temas now trembled. Fear of battle was a nonexistent thing—but fear of failure could be real, and was. It was real and living—and kept alive by the nearness of an enemy more formidable than any lion—an enemy with the hated name Medoto.

- 5 He thought of Medoto—of that Medoto who lay not far away in the deep grass watching the same ravine. Of that Medoto who, out of hate and jealousy over a mere girl, now hoped in his heart that Temas would flinch at the moment of his trial. . . .

#### Close Read

1. Review the boxed detail. What does it tell you about the building conflict between Temas and Medoto?
2. In addition to his conflict with Medoto, what internal conflict is plaguing Temas?



### MODEL 2: CONFLICT AT CLIMAX

Later, Temas learns that his rival is actually a friend. Find out how the conflict between Temas and Medoto changes at the story's climax.

*During the test, Temas feels relieved when the lion attacks another hunter. Then Medoto throws a stone, causing the lion to charge Temas. Without hesitation, Temas kills the lion. Later, Medoto explains himself to Temas.*

“If, until now, I have seemed your enemy, it was because I feared you would be braver than I, for when I fought my lion my knees trembled and my heart was white—until that charge was made. No one knew that, and I am called Medoto, the unflinching, but I flinched. I trembled.”

- 5 He stepped closer to Temas. He smiled. “It is no good to lie,” he said. “I wanted you to fail, but when I saw you hesitate I could not bear it because I remembered my own hour of fear. It was then I threw the stone—not to shame you, but to save you from shame—for I saw that your fear was not fear of death, but fear of failure—and this I understood. You are a greater warrior than I—than any—for who but the bravest would do what you have done?” Medoto
- 10 I paused and watched a light of wonderment kindle in Temas’s eye. The hand of Temas slipped from his sword, his muscles relaxed. Yet, for a moment, he did not speak, and as he looked at Medoto, it was clear to both that the identical thought, the identical vision, had come to each of them. It was the vision that
- 15 must and always will come to young men everywhere, the vision of a girl.

Now this vision stood between them, and nothing else. But it stood like a barrier, the last barrier.

#### Close Read

1. How has the conflict between Temas and Medoto changed? Support your answer with evidence.
2. What aspect of Medoto’s and Temas’s conflict still remains unresolved? Explain.

## Part 2: Sequence and Time

From fairy tales, with their “once upon a time” beginnings and “happily ever after” endings, to modern classics, many great stories feature **chronological order**. The events follow a linear **structure**—that is, they take place one after the other.

Sometimes, however, a writer plays with time by interrupting the chronological order of events. He or she may suddenly focus on an event from the past or hint at future events. A writer may manipulate time for a variety of reasons—for example, to give you a deeper sense of the characters and conflicts or to keep you wondering what will happen next.

**Flashback** and **foreshadowing** are two common devices that writers use to introduce past and future events. By recognizing these devices, you can follow a story more closely and learn how the author manipulates time to create mystery, tension, or surprise.

### FLASHBACK

#### What is it?

An account of a conversation, episode, or event that happened before the beginning of the story, or at an earlier point



#### What does it do?

- Interrupts the main action to describe earlier events
- Shows how past events led up to the present situation, sometimes creating mystery or surprise in the process
- Provides background information about a character or event

#### How can I recognize it?

- Look for possible clue words and phrases, such as “that summer,” “as a young boy,” or “her earliest memories.”
- Keep track of the chronological order of events so that you will be aware of events that interrupt this order.

### FORESHADOWING

#### What is it?

A writer’s use of hints or clues in early scenes to suggest events that will occur later



#### What does it do?

- Prepares readers for events that come later—often in the climax or the resolution
- Creates tension and suspense
- Makes readers eager to keep reading

#### How can I recognize it?

- Pay attention to repeated or emphasized ideas and descriptions.
- Notice when characters make important statements or behave in unusual ways.

**MODEL: FLASHBACK**

Moments after meeting the narrator in this story, you are transported to an earlier time in his life. As you read, notice what this flashback reveals about the narrator and his family.

from **Sweet Potato Pie**

Short story by **Eugenia Collier**

From up here on the fourteenth floor, my brother Charley looks like an insect scurrying among other insects. A deep feeling of love surges through me. . . .

Because I see Charley so seldom, my thoughts hover over him like hummingbirds. The cheerful, impersonal tidiness of this room is a world away  
 5 from Charley's walk-up flat in Harlem and a hundred worlds from the bare, noisy shanty where he and the rest of us spent what there was of childhood. I close my eyes, and side by side I see the Charley of my boyhood and the Charley of this afternoon, as clearly as if I were looking at a split TV screen. Another surge of love, seasoned with gratitude, wells up in me.

10 As far as I know, Charley never had any childhood at all. The oldest children of sharecroppers never do. Mama and Pa were shadowy figures whose voices I heard vaguely in the morning when sleep was shallow and whom I glimpsed as they left for the field before I was fully awake or as they trudged wearily into the house at night when my lids were irresistibly heavy.

15 They came into sharp focus only on special occasions. One such occasion was the day when the crops were in and the sharecroppers were paid. In our cabin there was so much excitement in the air that even I, the "baby," responded to it. For weeks we had been running out of things that we could neither grow nor get on credit. On the evening of that day we waited anxiously for our  
 20 parents' return. Then we would cluster around the rough wooden table—I on Lil's lap or clinging to Charley's neck, little Alberta nervously tugging her plait, Jamie crouched at Mama's elbow, like a panther about to spring, and all seven of us silent for once, waiting. Pa would place the money on the table—gently, for it was made from the sweat of their bodies and from their children's tears.  
 25 Mama would count it out in little piles, her dark face stern and, I think now, beautiful. Not with the hollow beauty of well-modeled features but with the strong radiance of one who has suffered and never yielded.

30 "This for store bill," she would mutter, making a little pile. "This for c'llection. This for piece o'gingham . . ." and so on, stretching the money as tight over our collective needs as Jamie's outgrown pants were stretched over my bottom. "Well, that's the crop." She would look up at Pa at last. "It'll do." Pa's face would relax, and a general grin flitted from child to child. We would survive, at least for the present.

**Close Read**

1. Explain what happens before the flashback.
2. At what point does the flashback begin? Explain the words or phrases that helped you identify it.
3. Find three details that describe the narrator's and Charley's family. One has been boxed. What do these details tell you about their childhood?
4. How does the flashback help you understand the narrator's feelings about Charley?

## Part 3: Analyze the Text

It seems like a familiar story. Girl meets and falls in love with boy. Boy falls in love with girl. After overcoming a few problems, they live happily ever after. Right? Wrong. This story traces a conflict, but that conflict is not resolved in a predictable way. As you read, use what you've learned about plot structure, conflict, and sequence to analyze the story.

# Checkouts



Short story by **Cynthia Rylant**

Her parents had moved her to Cincinnati, to a large house with beveled glass<sup>1</sup> windows and several porches and the *history* her mother liked to emphasize. You'll love the house, they said. You'll be lonely at first, they admitted, but you're so nice you'll make friends fast. And as an impulse tore at her to lie on the floor, to hold to their ankles and tell them she felt she was dying, to offer anything, anything at all, so they might allow her to finish growing up in the town of her childhood, they firmed their mouths and spoke from their chests and they said, It's decided.

They moved her to Cincinnati, where for a month she spent the greater part of every day in a room full of beveled glass windows, sifting through photographs of the life she'd lived and left behind. But it is difficult work, suffering, and in its own way a kind of art, and finally she didn't have the energy for it anymore, so she emerged from the beautiful house and fell in love with a bag boy at the supermarket. Of course, this didn't happen all at once, just like that, but in the sequence of things that's exactly the way it happened.

She liked to grocery shop. She loved it in the way some people love to drive long country roads, because doing it she could think and relax and wander. Her parents wrote up the list and handed it to her and off she went without

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1. **beveled glass:** glass whose edges are cut at an angle.

### Close Read

1. What do you learn about the setting and the main character's situation in the exposition of this story?
2. Reread lines 11–15, which set the stage for the main conflict. What do you think the conflict will be about?
3. Review the boxed details about the girl. What do they reveal about her personality?

complaint to perform what they regarded as a great sacrifice of her time and a sign that she was indeed a very nice girl. She had never told them how much she loved grocery shopping, only that she was “willing” to do it. She had an intuition which told her that her parents were not safe for sharing such strong, important facts about herself. Let them think they knew her.

Once inside the supermarket, her hands firmly around the handle of the cart, she would lapse into a kind of reverie and wheel toward the produce. Like a Tibetan monk<sup>2</sup> in solitary meditation, she calmed to a point of deep, deep happiness; this feeling came to her, reliably, if strangely, only in the supermarket.

Then one day the bag boy dropped her jar of mayonnaise and that is how she fell in love.

He was nervous—first day on the job—and along had come this fascinating girl, standing in the checkout line with the unfocused stare one often sees in young children, her face turned enough away that he might take several full looks at her as he packed sturdy bags full of food and the goods of modern life. She interested him because her hair was red and thick, and in it she had placed a huge orange bow, nearly the size of a small hat. That was enough to distract him, and when finally it was her groceries he was packing, she looked at him and smiled and he could respond only by busting her jar of mayonnaise on the floor, shards of glass and oozing cream decorating the area around his feet.

She loved him at exactly that moment, and if he’d known this perhaps he wouldn’t have fallen into the brown depression he fell into, which lasted the rest of his shift. He believed he must have looked a fool in her eyes, and he envied the sureness of everyone around him: the cocky cashier at the register, the grim and harried store manager, the bland butcher, and the brazen bag boys who smoked in the warehouse on their breaks. He wanted a second chance. Another chance to be confident and say witty things to her as he threw tin cans into her bags, persuading her to allow him to help her to her car so he might learn just a little about her, check out the floor of the car for signs of hobbies or fetishes and the bumpers for clues as to beliefs and loyalties.

But he busted her jar of mayonnaise and nothing else worked out for the rest of the day.

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2. **Tibetan monk:** a member of a Buddhist sect in central Asia that practices meditation.

### Close Read

4. What event on this page sets the rising action in motion?

5. How would you describe the conflict faced by the girl and the bag boy? How does this conflict make the story more interesting?

Strange, how attractive clumsiness can be. She left the supermarket with stars in her eyes, for she had loved the way his long nervous fingers moved from the conveyor belt to the bags, how deftly (until the mayonnaise) they had picked up her items and placed them into her bags. She had loved the way the hair kept falling into his eyes as he leaned over to grab a box or a tin. And the tattered brown shoes he wore with no socks. And the left side of his collar turned in rather than out.

The bag boy seemed a wonderful contrast to the perfectly beautiful house she had been forced to accept as her home, to the *history* she hated, to the loneliness she had become used to, and she couldn't wait to come back for more of his awkwardness and dishevelment.

Incredibly, it was another four weeks before they saw each other again. As fate would have it, her visits to the supermarket never coincided with his schedule to bag. Each time she went to the store, her eyes scanned the checkouts at once, her heart in her mouth. And each hour he worked, the bag boy kept one eye on the door, watching for the red-haired girl with the big orange bow.

Yet in their disappointment these weeks there was a kind of ecstasy. It is reason enough to be alive, the hope you may see again some face which has meant something to you. The anticipation of meeting the bag boy eased the girl's painful transition into her new and jarring life in Cincinnati. It provided for her an anchor amid all that was impersonal and unfamiliar, and she spent less time on thoughts of what she had left behind as she concentrated on what might lie ahead. And for the boy, the long and often tedious hours at the supermarket which provided no challenge other than that of showing up the following workday . . . these hours became possibilities of mystery and romance for him as he watched the electric doors for the girl in the orange bow.

And when finally they did meet up again, neither offered a clue to the other that he, or she, had been the object of obsessive thought for weeks. She spotted him as soon as she came into the store, but she kept her eyes strictly in front of her as she pulled out a cart and wheeled it toward the produce. And he, too, knew the instant she came through the door—though the orange bow was gone, replaced by a small but bright yellow flower instead—and he never

### Close Read

- Review lines 29–68. Summarize the sequence of events that begins with the boy's dropping the jar. How do these events build suspense about what will happen?
- What details in lines 69–78 tell you that the girl and the boy are enjoying the excitement of the building conflict? One has been boxed.
- Look for time cues—like the boxed examples in lines 79 and 81—that signal the order of events. Has the structure of this plot been chronological so far? Explain.

85 once turned his head in her direction but watched her from the corner of his vision as he tried to swallow back the fear in his throat.

It is odd how we sometimes deny ourselves the very pleasure we have longed for and which is finally within our reach. For some perverse reason she would not have been able to articulate, the girl did not bring her cart up to the bag boy's checkout when her shopping was done. And the bag boy let her leave the store, pretending no notice of her.

This is often the way of children, when they truly want a thing, to pretend that they don't. And then they grow angry when no one tries harder to give them this thing they so casually rejected, and they soon find themselves in a rage simply because they cannot say yes when they mean yes. Humans are very complicated. (And perhaps cats, who have been known to react in the same way, though the resulting rage can only be guessed at.)

The girl hated herself for not checking out at the boy's line, and the boy hated himself for not catching her eye and saying hello, and they most sincerely hated each other without having ever exchanged even two minutes of conversation.

**E**ventually—in fact, within the week—a kind and intelligent boy who lived very near her beautiful house asked the girl to a movie and she gave up her fancy for the bag boy at the supermarket. And the bag boy himself grew so bored with his job that he made a desperate search for something better and ended up in a bookstore where scores of fascinating girls lingered like honeybees about a hive. Some months later the bag boy and the girl with the orange bow again crossed paths, standing in line with their dates at a movie theater, and, glancing toward the other, each smiled slightly, then looked away, as strangers on public buses often do, when one is moving off the bus and the other is moving on.

### Close Read

9. Reread lines 79–86, which mark the story's climax. How do the characters resolve the main conflict?
10. In the falling action stage, lines 87–101, the characters reflect on their actions. Are they happy with the way they've handled the conflict? Explain.
11. Reread the resolution in lines 102–111. What are the results of the conflict for each character?
12. Describe the parallel structure of the three encounters between the girl and the boy. How are the meetings similar?